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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

1 June 1965

MEMORANDUM FOR THE UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-65: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN  
US ACTIONS

1. The attached draft estimate has been approved by the Board of National Estimates after consideration of it by the USIB representatives.
2. This estimate has been placed on the agenda of the USIB meeting scheduled for 1030, Wednesday, 2 June.



Executive Officer  
National Estimates

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

1 June 1965

SNIE 10-6-65: PROBABLE COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the reactions of the USSR, Communist China, and North Vietnam to US air strikes, including the use of heavy bombers, aimed at destroying fighter and bomber aircraft and surface-to-air missiles in North Vietnam.

THE ESTIMATE

1. Present Communist Reading of the Situation. In failing to make any meaningful responses to the "pause," the DRV has plainly indicated that it is prepared to accept not only a continuation of US air attacks on military and transportation targets south of the 20th parallel, but also a considerable risk that the US will extend such attacks northward. The USSR, by supplying limited numbers of fighters, SAMs, and light bombers to

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the DRV, probably hopes to deter the US from air attacks in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. The Soviets would not consider the actual combat capabilities of these weapons to be the primary deterrent factor. The deterrent effect would rest more in the recognition by the US that to attack this element of Soviet support for the DRV would risk involving Moscow even more deeply. Peiping's apprehensions regarding an extension of US air attacks northward are evident in its propaganda, its civil defense measures, and its public and private statements to outsiders, but it is evidently prepared to accept this risk.\*

Probable DRV Reactions

2. In light of these circumstances, attacks on North Vietnam's jet-capable airfields and SAM sites would be read by Hanoi to mean that military targets anywhere in the DRV were not safe from US attacks and that the chances of future attacks on urban centers and/or industrial targets were greatly increased. The DRV leaders would almost certainly believe that the US was ready to apply

\* The representative for the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF, reserves his position on this paragraph.

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substantially greater force if needed to attain its stated objective of stopping DRV intervention in South Vietnam. It would also reinforce their view that US objectives are not as limited in scope as the US has avowed. They recognize the vulnerability of their cities and industry to US or US-aided aerial bombardment and realize that their laborious efforts at industrialization over the past decade could be wiped out in short order.

3. Hanoi's decisions, however, probably have been and will continue to be influenced primarily by its estimate of the likely course of the war in the South. It probably thinks that, given present VC military strength and the political fragility of the Saigon regime, Communist forces in South Vietnam are moving toward victories which could crack their adversaries' will to continue the struggle. If so, Hanoi might feel that punishment from the air would be an acceptable price to pay for the early achievement of its political objectives.

4. SNIE 10-3/1-65, dated 18 February 1965, noted that if faced with a declared and sustained US program of bombing in the north, Hanoi " . . . might decide to intensify the struggle, accepting the destructive consequences in the North in the

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expectation of early victory in the South" (paragraph 8) but that it was "somewhat more likely . . . that they would decide to make some effort to secure a respite from US air attack, especially if the US had indicated that such a respite would follow a sharp reduction of Viet Cong activity." (paragraph 9) The important new element of growing Soviet involvement and other evidence which has become available since February -- Hanoi's truculent response to the bombings conducted to date, its obvious continuation of support to the VC despite these bombings, its contemptuous public rejection of the "pause," and its signs of preparation to accept further bombardment -- lead us to feel that this delicate and difficult judgment should now be weighted the other way; that is, that Hanoi is now rather more likely to persevere than to make conciliatory gestures to secure a respite from such a declared and sustained US program of bombing in the North.\*

5. If Hanoi did persevere, it would be unlikely to revise its military strategy or basic timetable in response to the US strikes. Nevertheless, for psychological effect on both Communists and anti-Communists, Hanoi might order retaliatory Viet Cong raids,

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sabotage, or sneak attacks on major bases or installations in South Vietnam. For similar reasons, Hanoi -- perhaps encouraged by Peiping -- would almost certainly re-examine the possibility of striking at the US carrier force in the Tonkin Gulf by sea or from the air and would certainly study the feasibility of an air strike against US installations in South Vietnam. Though Hanoi would probably estimate that the chances of seriously damaging US forces was not great, the effect of a successful attack would be psychologically so advantageous that Hanoi might make the attempt if it had the capability.

6. If the US strikes had destroyed their air offensive capabilities, the North Vietnamese might consider an overt invasion of South Vietnam. Because of the great risks of such an action, however, we believe they would not do so. Hanoi would certainly continue and, to the extent possible, step up its support of the Viet Cong and would almost certainly seek to inject an increasing number of North Vietnamese line units into Viet Cong forces with little or no effort at concealment. The fears engendered by the US bombings would probably not weaken Hanoi's determination or loosen its control of the country. Indeed, it might have the opposite effect of rallying the population behind the regime.

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7. Probable Chinese Communist Reactions. Although the Chinese Communists have professed to believe all along that the US would expand its air strikes, the bombing of SAM sites and airfields north of the 20th parallel would still be regarded in Peiping as a major and serious development. However, the Chinese leaders probably are more optimistic than Hanoi, and certainly more so than Moscow, that the US is nearing a humiliating defeat in the South, and will urge Hanoi to stand firm whatever the cost. The use of SAC bombers would increase Peiping's concern that eventually these strategic forces might be used against targets in China, particularly in nuclear attacks against advanced weapons facilities. Nevertheless, the Chinese would feel a strong need to do something more to help the North Vietnamese, and to prevent Moscow from gaining more influence in Hanoi and in the Vietnamese situation in general. They would also seek to exploit the situation to embarrass Moscow.

8. It is likely, if Hanoi so requested, that the Chinese would provide additional support, e.g., ground equipment and personnel for air defense purposes or engineering help for constructing and repairing airfields. The Chinese probably would also supply fighter aircraft units on request, providing they

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could be based in North Vietnam. They would not wish to use bases in China because of the risk of US retaliatory strikes against these bases.\* The Chinese might offer to send ground combat troops to North Vietnam as an earnest of their commitment to defend their ally, but we do not believe bombing of airfields and SAM sites would bring Hanoi to the point of accepting such an offer by Peiping. Unless and until Peiping concluded that the Hanoi regime was in danger, it would probably not unilaterally send a "rescue mission" into North Vietnam.

Probable Soviet Reactions

9. US bombings of airfields and SAM sites, especially by bombers from the Strategic Air Command, would provoke a crisis for Soviet policy. So far the Soviets have been pursuing three somewhat inconsistent objectives -- to compete with Peiping for influence over the DRV, to contribute to deterring US pressures against Hanoi, and at the same time to avoid becoming overly involved in the present US-DRV confrontation. They have apparently hoped that, in view of the situation in South Vietnam, the US would sooner or later

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The representative of the Director, Intelligence and Research, Department of State, reserves his position on this sentence.

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have to negotiate its way out of the war. The postulated US actions would strike a blow at such calculations and would probably convince the Soviets that the risks and costs of their involvement would be greater than they had assumed. In particular, they are probably less able than they were some months ago to ignore casualties to Soviet personnel without loss of prestige.

10. They would almost certainly feel compelled to comply promptly with DRV requests to provide substitutes for those weapons systems destroyed by the US attack, though they might not again provide bomber aircraft. It is also probable that more Soviet personnel would be supplied to man such equipment. Moscow might even acknowledge a Soviet presence in the hope of deterring the US from further attacks, though this would risk a further loss of prestige if deterrence again failed.

11. The Soviets would clearly recognize the danger of continued escalation, particularly since SAC had been employed. Hence, they would probably urge Hanoi to open up political avenues for controlling the conflict and would put pressure on the US to stop bombing and to negotiate. Soviet pressures would be exerted in a variety of forums, but the DRV's demonstrated unwillingness to

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involve the UN in Vietnam makes it unlikely that that organ would become a major political battle ground. US-Soviet relations would further deteriorate. If the crisis deepened and Hanoi chose to continue the struggle, the Soviets would face their most serious dilemma since the Cuban missile crisis.

12. It is possible that the Soviets, recognizing the growing chances of being forced to confront the US in Indochina would break with Peiping and Hanoi and back away from any deeper commitments. Moscow almost certainly realizes that the US enjoys a local military advantage vis-a-vis the USSR in the area. Nevertheless, we doubt that the Soviets would pay the political price of backing down and thereby handing China a major political victory and weakening its own prestige and influence throughout the world.

13. Thus in the aftermath of the US attack, we think the Soviets would probably conclude that they had little choice but to increase their commitments and aid to the DRV. If the war continued and the USSR was still unable to bring the US and the DRV to the conference table then further Soviet moves might include a defense guarantee of the DRV, threats to attack US bases, or overt deployment of Soviet forces to Vietnam (or the South China

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Sea) in an effort to dissuade the US. What precise moves Moscow would make would depend greatly on Hanoi's demands, on the nature and degree of Chinese involvement, and on how the Soviets interpreted US actions and estimated US intentions.\*

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The representative of the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, reserves his position on this paragraph.

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